

**Dan Burke Testimony on  
House Bill 357**

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For the record, my name is **Dan Burke** and I am the President of the Montana Association for the Blind and Chair of the Board of Directors of the Montana Business Enterprise Program for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Unfortunately I am unable to attend this hearing today due to a previously scheduled trip to Washington, D.C.

I would like to take this opportunity, however, to express my strong support for House Bill 357, which would have the effect of exempting the business enterprise program and its vendors from the current statutory prohibition against commercial enterprises on Interstate Rest Areas in Montana. If enacted, it would provide an important means of creating more job and business development opportunities for blind persons who are seeking competitive employment.

The blind vendor program was re-implemented in Montana at the urging and with the cooperation and support of the Montana Association for the Blind. We know blind people can be successful with the proper skills and opportunities. MBEI provides both while other opportunities for capable blind people are scarce.

In Montana, the blind vendor program was established to be an effective business development resource for blind and visually impaired persons. Its purpose is to provide opportunities for blind and visually impaired persons to become independent and self-sufficient through the management of profitable business enterprises of their own. The program consists of highly entrepreneurial small, franchised businesses owned and managed by licensed blind vendors. Businesses include vending machine routes and snack bar and other food service operations, primarily on state and federal properties.

The program is authorized by the federal Randolph-Sheppard Act of 1936, as amended, and the Montana Blind Vendors Act of 1981. In addition, the federal transportation statute provides a priority for business enterprise programs and their vendors to operate vending facilities on Interstate Rest Areas. The passage of HB 357 would clear the way for the program to begin to develop these opportunities.

Since 2002, MBEP has employed 14 blind persons as vending and management staff. Currently, we have five full-time vendors operating vending machine routes and two federal building snack bars in Billings, Bozeman, Helena, and Missoula. Last year our vendors generated approximately \$267,000 in total sales and \$50,000 in net profits. (MBEP also currently has four vendors who have been trained but not yet placed due to a lack of resources with which to purchase necessary vending equipment.)

The establishment of the business enterprise program has been very important to the blind and visually impaired community in Montana, especially to those who want to work and operate their own businesses (the unemployment rate for blind people is currently around 75%). First of all, it has provided an emphatic indicator that blind people can successfully do this kind of work, and second, it provides truly meaningful business development and employment opportunities that can lead to financial independence and self-sufficiency - along with a corresponding decrease in dependence on federal and state

For these reasons the Montana Association for the Blind and the board of directors of the Montana Business Enterprise Program strongly encourage you to cast a ye a vote in favor of HB 357.

Thank you,

Daniel Burke